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Morality at play: pretend play in five-year-old children in New Zealand bushland

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Abstract

This article discusses how a group of four-year-old children in New Zealand engage in pretend play by embodying the characters of mud-monsters and possums to avoid the rules around being respectful to their cultural heritage whilst playing in a protected bush reserve. The data were generated through a project investigating teaching and learning in everyday conversations between preschool teachers and children aged 2 ½ - 5 years old. Ten hours of video footage were gathered, of which one hour and forty minutes were in rural bushland.

The concept of ‘play’ is notoriously ambiguous (Sutton-Smith, 1997), but we do know that when children engage in make-believe play the activity provides benefits for psychological development and holistic health (Kitson, 2010), and building knowledge and relationships (Bateman, 2015). Prior research on children’s pretend play using conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis reveal how membership categories are used to initiate and maintain social order during pretend play (Butler, 2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006), and how object transformation is locally managed by children either as an individual or collaborative project (Sidnell, 2011).

The analysis of the footage here uses an ethnomethodological framework, discussing the work of Sacks (1992) and Garfinkel (1967) to reveal the sequential organisation of moral conduct in situ. The unfolding interaction begins with the children entering a protected bush reserve where they are encouraged to perform the act of making a promise to the Māori God of the forest, Tāne Mahuta, to protect his trees and plants during their visit. The teachers subsequently orient back to this performative action when the children’s play later becomes destructive. The multimodal ways of embodying their chosen destructive characters through predicated actions reveal how the children attempt to evade the negative consequences of breaking their promise through pretend play, as they become the characters ‘mud-monsters’ and ‘possums’ who are no longer the children tied to the performative action. The article concludes with connections to moral philosophy, and by discussing how the turns of talk and gesture co-produce complex learning of culturally and morally appropriate behaviours in situ.

Key words:

Children’s pretend play; New Zealand; morality; adult-child interaction; conversation analysis; performative actions

This article is developed from prior work exploring how the outdoor environment provides opportunities for children to learn about being respectful of indigenous Māori protocols during outdoor activity in a protected bush reserve in New Zealand (Bateman, Hohepa and Bennett, 2017). The issues specifically around children's morality are now explored in more detail with reference to moral philosophy to explore further how moral stance is executed by the children and teacher in the co-production of everyday interaction on a turn-by-turn basis.

Children, rules and accountability

Accountability and rules are embedded in everyday life where they build the foundation for cultural norms and what is defined as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. Children's social interactions demonstrate their competence in rule governance and the co-production of their own unique culture (for example, Corsaro & Eder, 1990). From an ethnomethodological perspective, Sacks (1992, Volume 2) suggests that children learn about rules 'when a rule is used to correct some action that they did or didn't do' (p. 491), making a specific rule applicable to their action and directly relevant for them. Although, in order to stay out of trouble, children just need to conform to rules, in reality rules are very narrow in their correct use, so where applying a rule in one situation might be correct, it is incorrect if applied to a different situation. These experiences teach children that rules are applicable everywhere, and that it is just a matter of finding the right rule for the right situation in order to avoid getting into trouble, and this problem is one that is usually managed 'empirically'.

So, as adults characteristically use a rule to correct a child's intended rule-governed activity, one thing that can and does occur is the child using a rule to counterpose a proposed violation. Children come to learn to answer complaints about possible rule violations by introducing another rule which yields the very thing that is being treated as a violation. And they get a special kick out of it. So they can be motivated to acquire skill in rule manipulation by reference to the way that that can save them in situations of possible sanction.... This is one perfect fantasy solution for children who live with the authority of adults.

(Sacks, 1992, Vol II, p. 492).

From an ethnomethodological perspective, rules are tied to accountability and social sanctions in everyday life where the accountability of actions is a contextual matter (Garfinkel, 1967). Accountable actions are similar to laws, in that they are often there to guide particular behaviour but can be "loose" and conditional on the context. As Helmer and Rescher (1958, cited in Garfinkle, 1967) suggest, 'a supposed violation of the law may be explicable by showing that a legitimate, but as yet unformulated, precondition of the law's applicability is not fulfilled in the case under consideration' (p. 2). Norms and remedial interchanges are employed that provide 'penalties for infraction...[and]...rewards for exemplary compliance. The significance of these rewards and penalties is not meant to lie in their intrinsic, substantive worth but in what they proclaim about the moral status of the actor' (Goffman, 1971, p. 95). Demonstrating an inclination to abide by rules, or not, gives others the opportunity to judge the moral character of that person.

In the study now discussed, the practical procedures of observable moral work is explored, include making a promise to a Māori God before entering His forest, where this action is treated as an accountable everyday mundane activity that is recognisable as familiar for those members of that particular New Zealand early childhood centre.

The project

Teachers in New Zealand (and in many other countries currently) are encouraged to support and extend the learning of infants, toddlers and young children through following their interests where ‘[t]ime and opportunities are provided for children to talk about moral issues’ (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, p. 71). Such guidance within national curricula recognises not only the importance of affording opportunities for children to form and express their moral stance, but also the collaborative nature, or co-construction of moral work where morality is viewed as being accomplished and shaped in interaction with others.

The importance of outdoor play is also recognised in the New Zealand early childhood national curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), to encourage children to engage with their natural surroundings where opportunities for exploration of the natural world are afforded.

The current project explored teacher-child interactions in everyday early childhood education with one centre in New Zealand (Bateman, 2012). The research approach was theoretically framed by ethnomethodology to explore everyday practice in situ. Everyday interactions between teachers and children aged 2 ½ years – 5 years were video recorded intermittently throughout one year, where one hour and forty minutes of video recording were taken on a routine outing to a protected bush reserve. Ethical approval was gained through the Waikato University Ethics Committee, including assent processes for children, and processes for withdrawing assent. At the end of the video collection day, the participating teachers identified moments of significant teaching and learning. These moments were then transcribed and analysed using a conversation analysis approach (Sacks, 1992) to reveal the systematic orderly features of the co-construction of knowledge. This article now focuses on the single case analysis of the bush walk and discusses the work of Sacks (1992), Garfinkel (1967) and moral philosophy to reveal how the children and teachers accomplish moral work as a joint project through attending to the rule of making a promise to the Māori God, Tāne Mahuta upon entering the forest. During analysis of the data, the teachers and children were observed orienting to the making of a promise, and this action was oriented back to throughout the trip, making this a phenomenon of interest for the participants themselves, and so one of the inductive findings. The time of each transcript is presented to show how this is managed in real time.

Children’s morality in action

Excerpt 1

Each time the children are on a bush walk they are required to perform the routine of asking Tāne Mahuta, the Māori God of the forest, permission to enter by reciting specific words that make a promise to Him not to hurt his animals, trees or plants. The following transcript presents how this promise is made in situ by two children and with prompts from a teacher. This first interaction is between the early childhood teacher Tim (TIM), Kyber (KBR) and Dyaln (DYL) who are four-year-old children; they are also accompanied by a second teacher (TCH). A young girl, Hera, who is new to the preschool is also present.

Tim 2nd data collection: Time: 32 seconds

01 TIM: [poor tree↑]
02 KBR: [↑Tāne Mahuta] can we come in↓ (0.4) we won’t hurt

03 your >animals< or your (0.4) creatures or you pl::ants↓
 04 (0.8) I ↑said the wo↓:rds:↑
 05 TCH: I=was=just need to explain to H↑era↓ (1.5) when we were
 06 on the bridge- ↑before we go into Pukemokemoke↓ we ask
 07 [()]
 08 ?: [Pukemokemoke]
 09 TCH: Pukemokemoke:↑ we ask Tāne Mahuta who's the ↓God
 10 ↑of the ↓for↑est (0.6) permission to enter his ↑forest↓
 11 ↑Dylan do you want to tell (0.7) Hera what we sa:y↑
 12 DYL: y'ave to sa:y↓ (0.6) >Tāne=Mahuta< please can we come in
 13 °>an=we=wont=hurt=any=of=your=animals<°

As the children approach the forest, Tim's 'poor tree' (line 01) marks an empathic approach to treating the natural environment in a sensitive way from the start of the excursion. This empathic approach towards the environment, initiated by an adult co-produces socialisation of how to act and engage with specific environments in moral ways (Burdelski, 2013). Kyber overlaps this utterance and delves right in to reciting a well-rehearsed promise to Tāne Mahuta (lines 2 & 3). The action of making this promise marks a particular position through a performative action (Sacks, 1992), where he commits to acting in a particular way through saying particular words (Austin, 1961; 1962). His closing utterance 'I said the words' (line 4) displays his knowledge that this performative action is a social norm that is done prior to entering the forest. This action of saying the promise binds the children to act in a morally just, respectful way where subsequent actions are limited to those stated in the promise.

Although Kyber immediately recites the promise here, other children present have not, and so the teacher draws their attentions to the act of making the promise as a collective group (lines 05-10). In doing so, the teacher creates a collective moral stance towards behaving in this specific way in the protected bush reserve, making it the social norm in that place and at that time. Through joining together to assert this moral rule the children and teachers are enacting a collaborative affiliation to each other and Tāne Mahuta.

Excerpt 2

A problem then occurs a little less than a minute later when, at the entrance of the forest, one of the four-year-old children, Kaiden (KDN), refuses to conform to the rule of making the promise. Tim is seen to attend to this issue by scaffolding the child into saying the promise with him as a collaborative act.

Tim 2nd data collection: Time: 1 min 20 seconds

14 TIM: did you ask (0.5) Kaiden↑ ((walks towards Kaiden))
 15 KDN: <°I don't want to°> ((faces the bridge, looking away from
 16 Tim))
 17 TIM: you don't ↓want to↓
 18 KDN: °no°
 19 TIM: we need to make sure ↓that (0.4) he knows that we're not
 20 going to hurt his ↑trees ((crouches down to Kaiden))
 21 (0.8)
 22 KDN: °no°
 23 (0.9)
 24 TIM: hmmm↑
 25 KDN: °<no::>°↓
 26 TIM: ↓we can say it to↑gether↓

27 KDN: °<no::>°↓
 28 TIM: why not↑
 29 KDN: coz I don't want to:↓=
 30 TIM: =did you wake up ↓grum↑py↓
 31 (2.3)
 32 KDN: °I want to (1.3) (be) at <m:um:s↓>°
 33 TIM: ↓par↑don
 34 KDN: I=want↑ to be at ↓mums
 35 TIM: ↓oh↓ (0.7) we'll say it quickly (7.0) me and you (1.0)
 36 ↑Tāne Mahuta↑ (1.1) can we come in to your forest [we]
 37 KDN: [°()°]
 38 TIM: wont hurt any of your tree::s
 39 KDN: ↑or your <creatures↓>
 40 TIM: ↑or your <creatures↓> . ↑that's good↓ . ↓right . ↓come on
 41 do you wanna hold my hand↓ ((Kaiden and Tim hold hands
 42 and walk into the forest together with Matthew))

Sacks' (1992) discussion on children and rules suggests that children learn about rules in everyday life, through taking part in and observing activities, and by doing or not doing something in a correct way. Here, we see Kaiden not performing to the rules tied to the routine of entering the forest, as he refuses to recite the words that would lock him into a promise, limiting his subsequent actions to those cited in his promise.

The refusal begins with Kaiden's drawn out, but quiet presentation of this stance (lines 15-16) where he also marks his disaffiliation from the ongoing activity with gesture as he turns away and averts his gaze from Tim. Tim begins persuasion techniques specifically designed for Kaiden through his addressing of Kaiden's name (line 14) and through aligning his bodily position by crouching down to him (line 20). Tim offers a collaborative saying of the words, uniting them both as being tied to the promise together, and so taking a collaborative moral stance towards acting in a specific way. This initially does not work, as Kaiden offers an alternative activity to the one he is required to do by saying he wants to be at his Mum's (line 32). Tim, however, continues with his persuasion offering to say the words 'quickly' and together 'me and you' eventually prompting Kaiden to join in making the promise and moral obligation to Tāne Mahuta. By joining together in making the promise Tim and Kaiden are demonstrating their affiliation in acting in a specific moral way together.

Excerpt 3

Much later on the bush walk, the children and teachers have reached a clearing that they have called 'the playground' due to its topography which includes low branches to swing on, open space to run in and ditches to climb. As the children explore the area, Kyber (KBR) begins enacting the character of a possum.

Tim 2nd data collection: Time: 1 hour 18 mins 45 seconds

43 KBR: I'm a ↓possum↑
 44 JKS: well I'm not going **that** far ((points to the stream))
 45 KBR: ((grabs leaves and throws them into the stream))
 46 TIM: hey Kyber (0.6) [we promised]
 47 KBR: [I'm not Kyber]
 48 (3.1)
 49 TIM: well you promised Tāne Mahuta you weren't going to
 50 hurt (0.5) >his=things↓< and ↑throwing- (0.8) throwing

51 bra:nches is not (0.6) being respectful↓
 52 JKS: well I'm not gonna throw them ↑ei:ther↓
 53 TIM: that's good↓
 54 JKS: >because< I'm ↑not gonna break <↑m:y:> prom↓ise
 55 TIM: .hhh I know you're being a possum (0.3) and that is
 56 the sort of thing that possums do (1.2) but um
 57 (1.0) you **did** promise [Tāne that you wouldn't hurt
 58 it]
 59 JKS: [↑look he's b↓- he ↑**broke** it]
 60 ((Kyber picks a branch off the ground and breaks it
 61 in half. Kyber looks at Tim and taps the two branch
 62 pieces together))
 63 TIM: ↓oh that's a (0.3) dead branch on the ground ↑that's
 64 ok↓ 1.9) but throwing it [at]-
 65 JKS: [not] **that** ↓tree ((points))
 66 TIM: **throwing** it at plants is not being respectful=do you want
 67 to come-
 68 KBR: ((hits a bush with one of the branch halves))
 69 (2.4)
 70 JKS: he ↑did th↓at
 71 TIM: >K↑yber↓<
 72 KBR: ((turns to make eye contact with Tim))
 73 (2.1)
 74 TIM: please stop being so destructive↓
 75 (2.0)
 76 KBR: ((looks down and starts walking away))
 77 JKS: ↓I'm ↑not gonna do that↓
 78 TIM: lets [go] and find something to do instead↓
 79 ((they move away from the site))

Kyber initiates this interaction with Tim and Jackson by approaching them and announcing his new persona, prior to the gesture of throwing leaves and sticks into a nearby stream. The verbal action here mitigates Kyber's subsequent physical actions, where he shows an awareness that he is acting in a way that needs this pre-mitigating utterance 'I'm a possum' in the sequence of the interaction as he engages in an activity that is in conflict to his earlier promise. The way in which the interaction unfolds then confirms that Kyber's mitigation was needed, as Tim subsequently refers back to the promise and how this ties him to behave in a specific way.

The way in which Tim addresses this inappropriate behaviour (lines 49-51 & 55-58) is indirect and more of a warning than an explicit request to stop, where 'that you ought not to do the thing – is itself not asserted' (Sacks, 1992, p. 193). Tim 'isn't saying that you ought not to do it because it is wrong' (ibid), rather, the technique that Tim uses here is an offer of 'good advice' not a telling off. This conversational technique allows Tim to reprimand in a safe way without coming across as 'a traitor among them, or perfectly clearly an adult in child's guise' (Ibid). In doing so Tim removes himself from any consequential reprimand for Kyber's behaviour, and instead asserts an observational fact that asserts empathy for the environment, and so suggests a moral perspective about the behaviour whilst still maintaining his affiliation with Kyber. Kyber's actions here do not conform to Māori protocol that calls for the protection of the natural bush land, and instead actively show his breaking of his earlier promise (made in Excerpt 1) and immoral behaviour, and a 'danger' for Tim as a teacher whose role it is to ensure such Māori protocols are practiced during outdoor excursions.

Warnings, however, can in fact be heard as a challenge to those being warned, where, if a warning is successful it brings the warned person to recognise their actions as being in the class

‘dangerous’ (Sacks, 1992, Vol 1). The warned person may then see this as a challenge to continue their actions in order to belong to the category ‘dangerous’.

Here, Kyber asserts himself as no longer being Kyber (line 47), the boy who is tied to making the promise upon entering the forest, but a possum (line 43) - two separate beings. Kyber and the possum character, as Sacks states above, are ‘no longer subjectable to the same warnings’ where the actions of each asserted character can be differentiated as ‘things that are dangerous for one, are not for the other’, (Sacks, 1992, p. 347). Whereas Kyber made a promise to behave in a certain moral way when entering the forest, the possum character (known throughout NZ as being destructive to native bushland) did not, and so any sanctions are no longer applicable.

If, for example, there is something which, if you want to be a man you have to do, or if you have doubts about whether you are a man you might do to show it, then...[a man] refuses the warning, accepts the challenge, becomes a different object: No longer a boy, a man. As such, no longer subjectable to the same warnings. And that's of course a fact about dangerous things; they are differentiated. Things that are dangerous for one, are not for the other. (Sacks, 1992, Vol 1, p. 347).

Helmer and Rescher’s (1958 cited in Garfinkel, 1967) discussion of accountable actions and laws is applicable here when considering how they are “loose” and conditional on the context, where what is applicable in one situation is not in another. As is Sacks’ (1992, Vol 2) discussion on children’s use of rules where they learn that rules are also “loose” and context specific. Here, Kyber transforms himself from the person who would ordinarily be accountable for acting in a destructive way in a bush reserve, to a creature that is recognisable (even by the teacher) as being destructive to native bushland. This chosen character allows Kyber to display category bound activities that are relevant to such a character, and so permits him to act ‘without important moral consequences’ (ibid, p. 206).

Within this interaction, Jackson, a four-year-old girl also demonstrates her moral stance and understanding of the moral issues at play as she announces her opposing actions (lines 44 & 52 & 77) and that she will not brake her promise (line 55). By drawing attention to Kyber’s actions she is also pointing out her own moral stance as being in opposition to Kyber.

Excerpt 4

Tim 2nd data collection: Time: 1 hour 25 mins 10 seconds

A few minutes later, Tim and Jackson are sitting on a tree at the playground site. Kyber approaches them and asks Tim if he will be involved in a game of mud-monsters, swinging on the tree that Tim and Jackson are sitting on.

```
80 JKS:      <sto:::p> ((looks at Kyber))
81 TIM:      >K↑yber↓< (0.7) are [you listening↑]
82 KBR:      [I'm not Kyber↓] I'm not Kyber
83 TIM:      you're the mud monster↓
84 KBR:      yeah↓
85 TIM:      Jackson is asking you to stop
86           (2.4)
87 KBR:      ((looks at Tim and pulls some bark off the tree))
88 TIM:      please stop pulling the trees apart↓ Kyber↑ (1.1) you
```


89 promised Tāne Mahuta that you ↑wouldn't hurt his ↓trees
 90 and you have been- (0.5) been very de↑structive↓ since we
 91 g↑ot to the playground↓
 92 KBR: ((stops pulling the bark and looks down then walks
 93 away towards a group of children))

Kyber approaches Tim and Jackson, and this time begins swinging on the tree that Tim and Jackson are sitting in. This embodied way of initiating an interaction with Tim and Jackson does elicit a sequential response from the people he has approached, where Tim calls Kyber's name in a short but loud prosody. Following a brief pause, Kyber and Tim overlap as Tim tries to ensure that Kyber is listening (line 81), and Kyber asserts that, once again, he is not Kyber (line 82), repeating this after the overlap to ensure he is heard, in overlap resolution. Tim identifies the new persona 'mud-monster', demonstrating understanding around Kyber's new identity.

Whilst it is true that Kyber's actions breach Māori protocol here (and this might be a good reason to promise not to act in this way) it is the breaking of an earlier promise that is relied upon to persuade Kyber to change behaviour. Thus Kyber's supposed moral obligations are taken by all participants to arise not from the existence of external rules that must be recognised. Instead, the moral obligations are taken to apply in light of Kyber's voluntary promise which creates these obligations for him and set standards to which he can now legitimately be held (lines 88-91).

Promising and Agency

So, from an ethnomethodological perspective, what we see in these conversational interactions are a clear set of statements that invoke the idea of moral rules and moral practices *in situ*. These include both pre-existing rules that are taken to have an imperative moral character and promises that either create rules or bind promise-makers to those existing rules. Sacks (1992) points out that moral statements of this sort are effectively assertions of affiliation, or perhaps expressions of solidarity, with a group. However, it is worth taking seriously the question that he says has typically concerned philosophers, 'if you assert some moral rule, are you doing anything more than asserting your affiliation?' (Sacks, Vol 1, 1992, p.195). It is certainly true that when you assert a rule for any reason then you are also asserting an affiliation (even if just to the group of people who together assert this rule) but is this all that you are doing? To some extent this remains an open question but further analysis of the interactions in the excerpts will make it clear that those involved in those interactions assume that they are not necessarily limited to expressing an affiliation. Nor is it clear that this is merely an interesting sociological or psychological feature of the people involved in these conversations rather than being, at the same time, a practical, if implicit, engagement with positions and disputes in moral philosophy.

It is interesting then to also consider moral and political philosophy here, to provide additional insight into issues of morality that complement the ethnomethodological approach used in this article. Morality and contract-based approaches are long standing, from the classic social contract theories of Hobbes (1996), Locke (1988) and Rousseau (1968) to contemporary theories of Gauthier (1986), Rawls (1999) and Scanlon (1998). These approaches, whilst varied, share the broad understanding of moral obligations as created or legitimated by the agreements people make to regulate our social and political interactions. In very basic terms, we are obliged to constrain our behaviour because we have agreed, one way or another, to do so. Contemporary contract-based approaches are typically divided into contractarian (or

Hobbesian) approaches and contractualist (or Kantian) approaches (Darwall, 2003; Freeman, 2007; Kymlicka, 1991; Sayre-McCord, 2000). Contractarian approaches (e.g. Hobbes and Gauthier) tend to think of contracts as rational agreements to cooperate made between self-interested persons as bargains for their mutual advantage. Contractualist approaches (e.g. Scanlon and Rawls) tend to think of contracts as reasonable agreements to cooperate made on the basis of respect for the freedom and moral equality of persons.

The interactions in situ make it clear that Tim, Kaiden and Kyber (and others present), despite the difficulties that are experienced, share a conception of the source of moral obligations and of the legitimacy of moral rules, as they demonstrate their ‘engagement with culture-building webs of meaning and repertoires of social practice’ (Ochs & Schieffelin 2012, p. 17). They are working with an understanding that obligations to limit or constrain behaviour are created and self-imposed by the act of promising rather than imposed on us by the assertion of authority or assumed by us as a function of group membership or shared affiliation. This is implicit in the reasons that are offered by Tim, to Kaiden and Kyber, for limiting their actions and changing their behaviour. It would be easy for Tim to assert the authority that comes with the role of teacher, effectively saying “obey the rule because I have the legitimate authority to impose it”, but Tim does not. He presents himself as a co-participant in the act of promising, rather than the source of obligation. Nor does Tim suggest to the children that the divine authority of Tāne Mahuta is the source of the obligation to constrain behaviour. Yes, promising is framed as part of asking Tāne Mahuta for permission to enter his forest but this ownership and the authority it provides is not presented as the source of the obligation to behave respectfully. Rather, it is presented to the children in a way that prompts them to have autonomy in assuming for themselves this obligation. Nor is the argument made to Kaiden or Kyber that they are already members of their group and that this community membership brings with it already assumed, or involuntary, obligations that have authority for them (Walzer, 2004). Instead, the children are treated as ‘competent and confident learners and communicators’ (MoE, 1996, p.9) where ‘[t]ime and opportunities are provided for children to talk about moral issues’ (Ibid, p. 71). In this way we should think of children’s socialisation around morality not simply as a matter of coming to act in accordance with group rules or standards for behaviour but as a more reciprocal process in which the children are regarded, and regard themselves, as active participants in that process (Burdelski, 2013; 2017).

It is worth exploring moral philosophy further here to see what these interactions imply about the moral understandings that appear to be shared by all participants. For example, one prominent account of how promising might be linked to obligation, a utilitarian consequentialist account, does not seem to be called upon by participants at all. Classic statements of utilitarianism can be found in Bentham (2001) and Mill (1962). Broadly speaking utilitarians typically argue that promises should be kept and moral rules followed because a failure to do so would lead, either directly as a consequence of punishment (for example) or indirectly as a consequence of the undermining of the useful institution of promising, to diminished welfare. On this understanding, persons are primarily seen as sites of welfare, or utility. For example, in Bentham’s interpretation persons are seen as experiencers of pleasure and pain and all justifying reasons are assessed in terms of their consequences for overall utility comprising of the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain (Bentham, 2001, pp. 87-93). At no point in these, admittedly limited, interactions are justifying reasons for moral obligations offered to the children in these terms. Nor are they rejected by the children on these grounds. Indeed, both the reasons that are offered in justification of obligations and the grounds on which Kyber challenges his perceived obligation reflect a very different shared

understanding of the relationship between promising and obligation, one linked to the idea of contract.

However, the reasons offered in the recorded interactions for making and keeping promises are not easily characterised in contractarian terms. They are not rational advantage arguments appealing to instrumental reasons such as “you will benefit” or “you will be safer”. Instead they are more easily characterised as broadly contractualist arguments about the reasonableness of agreeing to rules that respect the moral standing of others, whether they be fellow participants in these forest activities or the Māori communities whose beliefs they are promising to respect. However, contract-based approaches, whether contractarian or contractualist, share a deeper theoretical commitment that is more fundamental in the analysis of these interactions, the conception of persons as agents in their own right and with their own standing. It is this conception of persons as agents that is most apparent in each of the excerpts, making observable the implementation of Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) where children are philosophically presented as capable and competent members of society.

Persons as agents are capable of taking decisions and making agreements such as promises or contracts that bind them. ‘Obligations...arise as a result of our voluntary acts’ and ‘thus promising is an act done with the public intention of deliberately incurring an obligation’ (Rawls, 1999, pp. 97 & 305). There are commonly accepted conditions for the making of binding and legitimate promises. Rawls argues that,

For example, in order to make a binding promise, one must be fully conscious, in a rational frame of mind, and know the meaning of the operative words.... Furthermore, these words must be spoken freely or voluntarily, when one is not subject to threats or coercion... or forced to promise, or if pertinent information was deceitfully withheld.
(Rawls, 1999, p. 303)

Scanlon (1998, p. 199) accepts similar conditions for binding promises. What unites this list of conditions is that they each highlight ways in which a person’s agency may be impaired and thus the ‘bindingness’ of the promise undermine. Binding promises are made by persons whose agency is not so compromised.

It is this conception of persons as agents capable of binding themselves with promises that we find in contract theories, and also language socialisation theory (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012). Persons, including children, are regarded as beings with the agency that enables them to engage successfully with promising and the moral rules that they thus create. In response to the open question above, these children are not just affiliating to a group of one sort or another but also exercising their moral agency, as it recommended in Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996;2017). Their moral character is exhibited not just in rule-following behaviour but also in rule creation, and this is as apparent to the children as to their teacher. All parties, at least implicitly, recognise the relatively sophisticated capacity for moral agency in these children and, by extension, in children generally. This is apparent in several central aspects of the interactions highlighted in excerpts 1-4. Firstly, Tim actively seeks the promise of the children implicitly recognising their agency. Likewise, the children respond as agents. Secondly, the children are clearly capable of recognising, understanding and utilising the concept of moral rules and obligations created by binding promises. Thirdly, Kyber’s strategy of role-playing an alternative agent such as the possum (excerpt 3) and the mud monster (excerpt 4) displays a sophisticated conception of agency, demonstrating that they are not passive recipients of adult rules here (Ochs &

Schieffelin, 2012). Tim responds to Kyber as an agent who makes the distinction between his binding promise to Tāne Mahuta as Kyber, and the possum and the mud monster who have not so bound themselves. Kyber is exploiting an implicit understanding of the revolutionary potential of contract theories, and also shows his agency in contributing to the moral order (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012). Finally, implicit is a recognition by all that children, like adults, are agents which can be held to agreed standards of constrained behaviour in a way that neither animals nor monsters can be.

Concluding remarks

Although the benefits of play for children's learning are well-documented (for example, Pramling-Samuelsson & Fleer, 2009; Waller. Et al., 2017), children's competences in confronting adult-centric culturally and morally appropriate behaviours through play is less well-known, and explored here. We suggest that analysis demonstrates that children can exhibit a grasp of relatively complex moral concepts and behaviours that may track more sophisticated ideas from moral philosophy. Here we see that the children displayed agency in their playful activity, where pretend play offered affordances to re-formulating adult rules.

The collaborative nature of morality is evident here as being co-constructed in interaction and as a joint effort to be interactionally achieved. Kyber tries on the mud-monster and possum personas by announcing them to Tim to ensure the required understanding is secured to mitigate any subsequent disciplinary actions from Tim around his morally inappropriate behaviour in a sacred space.

What these interactions illustrate is that children, no less than adults, are being regarded by all participants as not simply the recipients of authoritative rules from an external source, nor simply as sites for the experience of welfare, but as sophisticated co-creators of the moral rules that apply to them as agents (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012). This should not really be a surprise as questions of moral rules and legitimate and reasonable constraints on behaviour arise out of the challenges of living together in societies and these challenges are faced by all persons, whatever their age. As Sacks (1992) suggests, children learn about how to negotiate such rules through their active participation in everyday life with others. Here we see that the children are engaged in making promises 'to set up and to stabilize small-scale schemes of cooperation' (Rawls, 1999, p. 304). They equally, therefore, face the challenge of justifying their actions to themselves and to those with whom they share a social context. Again, children are regarding themselves (and here also being so regarded by their teacher) as beings whose agency means they are expected to provide justifications of their actions and also that they are owed justifications of the actions of others and of the expectations of them that others have.

Implications, practice or policy

The exploration of the interactions in this article inductively revealed the sequential organisation of moral work between teachers and children in situ. We argue here that pretend play affords opportunities for children to engage in such important moral work, and hope to raise awareness of ensuring that early childhood teachers find space to support children to exercise their agency by participating in the co-creation of rules that apply to them. Through raising awareness, we hope to reinforce the importance of i) the recognition of the agency of others, ii) how children are socialised morally and empathically, and iii) building practices and habits of reciprocity and mutual recognition in everyday practice.

However, the issues explored here also raise conflicting issues for teachers who, in New Zealand (and increasingly other countries) aim to support and extend children's learning through playful activity initiated by the child's interests. What occurs here suggests that conforming to important protocols supporting cultural heritage and conventions is a complex issue with young children and worthy of further exploration in future research.

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